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RUEHME/AMEMBASSY MEXICO PRIORITY 3993  
RUEHQT/AMEMBASSY QUITO PRIORITY 2403  
RUEHSN/AMEMBASSY SAN SALVADOR PRIORITY 1002  
RUEHSG/AMEMBASSY SANTIAGO PRIORITY 3749  
RUEHAO/AMCONSUL CURACAO PRIORITY 0995  
RUEHGL/AMCONSUL GUAYAQUIL PRIORITY 0639  
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 CARACAS 002625

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SUBJECT: FROM LAUGHS TO VOTES: EL CONDE DE GUACHARO'S  
MAVERICK CANDIDACY

REF: CARACAS 2046

Classified By: POLITICAL COUNSELOR ROBERT DOWNES,  
REASON 1.4 (D)

¶1. (C) Summary. Comedian-turned-politician Benjamin Rausseo (a.k.a., "El Conde de Guacharo") has launched a semi-serious, but long-shot independent presidential campaign (Reftel). So far, Rausseo has been better at attracting publicity than organizing a nation-wide, grassroots political campaign. He and his closest supporters, however, are banking that Rausseo's outsider status and popular appeal can, in the coming weeks, win the support of the disaffected Venezuelan voters who support neither President Chavez nor consensus opposition candidate Manuel Rosales. If not, Rausseo says he will not be an electoral "spoiler," but rather will withdraw from the race in mid-November, if he still trails Rosales in the polls. After taking his campaign "show" to the streets of Venezuela's major cities, Rausseo would like to meet with Department officials in Washington in early September. End Summary.

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Courting the Alienated  
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¶2. (C) Maverick presidential candidate Benjamin Rausseo (more widely known as the straw-hatted comic character "El Conde de Guacharo"), flanked by his advisors Pedro Penzini Lopez, Humberto Anzola, Luis Chacon, and Eloy Albarran, met August 25 with poloffs at Penzini's residence. Rausseo told poloffs he decided to run for president to try to reduce the polarization plaguing Venezuelan politics and to reach out to disenchanted voters. He claimed to be the popular "face" on a substantial political swing away from President Chavez and away from consensus opposition candidate and Zulia Governor Manuel Rosales (the "ni-ni" vote). He and his advisors said they believe young people, in particular, are responding positively to Rausseo's campaign.

¶3. (C) Penzini conceded up front that Rausseo's campaign does not have a nationwide political apparatus or infrastructure

behind it. Instead, Rausseo will rely on winning free media attention ("I can't afford TV ads," Rausseo said) and mounting attention-getting public events in Venezuela's largest cities. Penzini also demonstrated the campaign's popular, sophisticated website (www.votapiedra.com) featuring El Conde de Guacharo's voice-over in English declaring, "President Chavez, you and your team are fired!" Rausseo's team highlighted an unattributed poll published August 25 in the weekly "Quinto Dia" that showed Rausseo with 18 percent support nationwide (compared to 21 percent for Rosales and 49 percent for Chavez).

14. (C) The Rausseo campaign team said they plan to run on a positive vision that addresses pressing socioeconomic issues, such as unemployment, crime, housing. At the same time, they hope to build a "mass movement" that is capable of putting pressure on the Chavez government to level the electoral playing field. "We want our votes to count," insisted Rausseo. Penzini added that the campaign intends to train and mobilize young people to be election monitors, ready to "camp out" in defense of a fair vote count.

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Inroads Among Chavistas?  
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15. (C) In addition to reaching out to disaffected voters, Rausseo claimed that he is making inroads among Chavez's traditional supporters. He asserted that his own Horatio Alger story, a former shoe-shine boy who became a successful entertainer, and more recently, a hotel/resort magnate, has broad appeal in Venezuela's poor communities. Rausseo's

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campaign team highlighted their candidate's successful August 22 visit to Caricuao, a hardscrabble neighborhood in western Caracas. They also noted that when Rausseo formally registered as a presidential candidate August 23 at the National Electoral Council (CNE), he and his posse of a few hundred supporters managed to parade down city blocks in the city center where Chavistas have traditionally muscled out the opposition.

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Respect for Rosales  
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16. (C) Asked about his campaign's relationship with Rosales, Rausseo said his campaign team is in touch with the consensus opposition candidate's advisors. Rosales advisor Timoteo Zambrano confirmed Rausseo's assertion that the camps remain in contact and are on good terms. Rausseo said he and Rosales are "running in their own lanes" without interfering with the other. Echoing Rosales's decision to take a leave of absence from the Zulia governorship during the election campaign, Rausseo ad-libbed to the media that he is also temporarily stepping down from his responsibilities as "El Conde de Guacharo." Rausseo confirmed that he plans to withdraw from the election if he still trails Rosales in public opinion polls in November ("I have given my word"). He also said Rosales should do the same if the reverse is true (although Rosales has made no such pledge).

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Going International  
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17. (C) Rausseo stressed that he supports close Venezuelan ties with the United States and has been more openly critical of Chavez's foreign policy than Rosales. Whenever he, like Rosales, is accused by Chavez supporters of being a "pawn of the Empire," El Conde de Guacharo jokes, "Why haven't the Americans deposited money in my account?" Moreover, Rausseo has been outspoken in his criticism of Chavez's foreign aid contributions, an issue that appears to be resonating with voters. In the last several days, Rausseo has also given

interviews with BBC, CNN Espanol, the New York Times, and the Washington Post, according to Penzini.

18. (C) Rausseo and some of his advisors (as yet unspecified) plan to visit the United States in early September ("I already have a visa -- and a Master Card," joked the candidate). After stops in Florida, they plan to visit the OAS to ask for OAS election observers in the run up to the December 3 election. Rausseo said he would also like to meeting at the U.S. State Department. Penzini admitted that Rausseo's team hopes that such a meeting would strengthen the credibility and seriousness of their campaign.

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Comment  
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19. (C) Despite wanting to be seen as a funny guy who is a serious candidate, El Conde de Guacharo brings more show than substance to the presidential campaign. After the initial media excitement subsides, he will be hard pressed to sustain a meaningful, nation-wide presidential campaign. It is possible that he could mobilize some disenchanted voters and woo some voters leaning toward Chavez. However, if he distracts attention and support from Rosales, a far-better positioned candidate, he will have harmed the opposition and advanced the prospects of a Chavez victory. We do not recommend giving him either visibility or credibility. Should he go to Washington, a meeting with a desk officer would appear to be appropriate. If El Conde eventually campaigns for consensus opposition candidate Manuel Rosales, Rausseo could provide Rosales with an electoral bump late in

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the campaign.  
WHITAKER